ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1

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An American finds Iran a pleasant surprise

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"YOU'RE going to Iran?" the flight attendant asked in disbelief. "Just being an American is a crime there."

While the Pakistani passengers on the Pakistan International Airlines flight to London changed into jeans, I carefully wrapped a veil around my head and shoulders as we descended to Tehran.

The first thing I saw when we touched down was a large sign on the outside of the terminal. Angry red letters declared, in English, "Down with the USA." Then followed an abbreviated version of the Iranian government's motto: "Neither East nor West, Islamic Republic is best." "Welcome to Iran" was nowhere to be found.

Only a few passengers got off the plane and headed for customs. I worried that the passport checker might say, "I'm sorry, your visa was issued by mistake. Get back on the plane." But he stamped my passport with a bored air, as if American tourists entered the country every day.

In fact, I was one of the few Americans who had been allowed into Iran since the revolution of 1979, when the Shah was ousted by a popular uprising and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic.

Diplomats in the Swiss Embassy, which now handles American interests in Iran, were shocked when I walked in the door to get a new passport during the latter part of my trip. They said I was the first American they could remember seeing in years.

"You are lucky to have been to different areas of the country. Two years ago, foreigners couldn't travel one hour out of Tehran," an embassy official told me. "But didn't you read your State Department's warning against Americans coming to Iran? I think we have a copy."

The advisory, published in February 1981, reads: "Travel to Iran is extremely hazardous because of the continuing anti-American atmosphere and the virulent anti-American stance of the Iranian government. . . . The possibility exists that American citizens traveling to Iran could be detained without charge or taken hostage. . . . Under these circumstances, the Department of State strongly urges United States citizens to avoid any travel to Iran."

"So," the Swiss official advised, "please find a safer place for your next vacation."

The Swiss were right in one regard: Not one Iranian I met in almost three months of travel around the country had seen an American since prerevolutionary days.

But they were wrong in another. Although I did meet with some suspicion, most of the time I received wonderful hospitality.

On the whole, strangers constantly went out of their way to help me, whether to find an unfamiliar tourist site or to locate a bakery for some of delicious Iranian bread — long, piping hot slabs topped with sesame seeds.

Many people, from police officers to taxi drivers, apologized for having forgotten their English. In the past six years, they hadn't needed to speak a word of it as the country turned away from contact with the West.

Rusty English was also a problem for the woman at the airport office of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, where I was taken that first day by a helpful airport official. This department, which replaced the Ministry of Tourism after the Revolution, was set up to advise foreigners on proper Islamic behavior while in Iran. Providing tourist information is a secondary role, since few tourists of any nationality have been admitted into Iran.

The woman at the ministry was astonished that I didn't have anyone to meet me at the airport, and moreover, that I didn't know a single Iranian. "You are all alone? What are you going to do?" she asked.

Courteously giving me a ride into downtown Tehran, she commented, "Before the coming of Imam Khomeini, I didn't know anything about Islam, or politics, or the superpowers." She pronounced the last word with distaste. "The Shah kept all this information from us. All women knew to be interested in was fashion. But now my leader has made us aware."

After exhortations to wear my *hijab*, or head covering, properly low over my forehead, she dropped me off at Revolutionary Square. I found myself in a crowd of medieval-looking forms enshrouded in black, interspersed with men wearing Army jackets, jeans, and tennis shoes.

From there, taking the wrong taxi three times, I managed to get very lost in Tehran. Each time, knots of people would gather helpfully, but no one spoke English. Long discussions were held in Farsi and hands would point in various directions. Eventually, I found myself on a bus to Mashhad, more than 600 miles away.

For the next 11 weeks of travel, I rarely needed to stay in a hotel. Almost everywhere I went, families invited me to their homes.

Great sensitivity was shown to my needs. Housewives would inquire anxiously what I liked to eat, and would send someone to the bazaar to get whatever wasn't in the house. One grandmother gave me a beautiful, peach-colord sweater she had knitted. "You can't go around with only that thin little *chador* now that it's winter, dear," she told me.

I had never encountered such thoughtfulness in any other country, even in the traditionally hospitable Middle East. Even at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs an official poured cup after cup of tea and apoligized for not having any fruit to offer me as I waited in his office. I had also never met with such curiosity.

Whereas anywhere else I would ply people with questions about local customs and culture, in Iran, I was the one under interrogation. How in the world had I gotten to Iran? How many brothers and sisters did I have? Why was I wearing an Afghan nomad dress? Why did I only drink peppermint tea and not eat meat? What had I studied in school? How did I like Iran?

Generally, people seemed only slightly cautious about associating with an American, but occasionally some fear showed through. A middle-aged woman clutching an armload of books sat beside me on the bus in Isfahan.

"Where are you from?" she whispered. When I told her, she said, "I thought so. I'm taking English classes right now, and I wish I could talk to you sometime to practice, but I'm afraid someone would find out. You shouldn't tell people you're American, they'll kill you."

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In fact, I had already had a run-in with the government and, obviously, was not killed.

While taking pictures of the mourning processions for the Shiite Muslim occasion of Ashura — the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussein (the Shiites' third imam or spiritual leader) — I had caught sight of some turbaned Afghans. As I snapped a photo, I heard an excited voice, and a hand was placed in front of my lens. Hussein, a young Revolutionary Guard who was explaining the religious intricacies of the occasion, accompanied me to the local police station.

Hussein dealt with the officials, then explained to me what had happened: The men I was photographing were Afghan resistance leaders and it was forbidden to take their pictures.

The policeman had first said suspiciously, "She must be an Afghan who came across our border illegally." Hussein asked if the officer had ever seen any Afghans with blond hair.

"Well, maybe she's a Russian spy," the policeman suggested.

Hussein pointed to the plastic bag around my wrist reading "Safeway, America's Favorite Food Store."

The officer's immediate reply: "Well, then, she's an American spy."

Hussein sighed. "Would they really be so stupid as to send an obvious American all the way here and have her stand out there in front of everyone? No. They could give a camera to any Iranian and no one would ever notice."

The policeman agreed that he had a point, and bade us a polite goodbye.